

Beverly of Graustark

By
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"you?" she faltered. The sound of her own voice in a measure restored the courage that had been paralyzed. Unconsciously this slim sprig of southern valor threw back her shoulders and lifted her chin. If they were brigands they should not find her a cringing coward. After all, she was a Calhoun.

The man she had first observed stopped near the horses' heads and peered intently at her from beneath a broad and rakish hat. He was tall and appeared to be more respectably clad than his fellows, although there was not one who looked as though he possessed a complete outfit of wearing apparel.

"Poor wayfarers, may it please your highness," replied the tall vagabond, bowing low. To her surprise, he spoke in very good English. His voice was clear, and there was a tinge of polite irony in the tones. "But all people are alike in the mountains. The king and the thief, the princess and the jade live in the common fold." And his hat swung so low that it touched the ground.

"I am powerless. I only implore you to take what valuables you may find and let us proceed unharmed!" she cried rapidly, eager to have it over.

"Pray, how can your highness proceed? You have no guide, no driver, no escort," said the man mockingly. Beverly looked at him appealingly, utterly without words to reply. The tears were welling to her eyes, and her heart was throbbing like that of a captured bird. In after life she was able to picture in her mind's eye all the details of that tableau in the mountain pass—the hopeless coach, the steaming horses, the rakish bandit and his picturesque men, the towering crags and a mite of a girl facing the end of everything.

"Your highness is said to be brave, but even your wonderful courage can

stranger laughed heartily and shook his head.

"Do we not look like honest men?" he cried, with a wave of his hand toward his companions. Beverly looked dubious. "We live the good, clean life of the wilderness. Outdoor life is necessary for our health. We could not live in the city," he went on, with grim humor. For the first time Beverly noticed that he wore a huge black patch over his left eye, held in place by a cord. He appeared more formidable than ever under the light of critical inspection.

"I am very much relieved," said Beverly, who was not at all relieved. "But why have you stopped us in this manner?"

"Stopped you?" cried the man with the patch. "I implore you to unsay that, your highness. Your coach was quite at a standstill before we knew of its presence. You do us a grave injustice."

"It's very strange," muttered Beverly, somewhat taken aback.

"Have you observed that it is quite dark?" asked the leader, putting away his brief show of indignation.

"Dear me; so it is!" cried she, now able to think more clearly.

"And you are miles from an inn or house of any kind," he went on. "Do you expect to stay here all night?"

"I'm—I'm not afraid," bravely shivered Beverly.

"It is most dangerous."

"I have a revolver," the weak little voice went on.

"Oho! What is it for?"

"To use in case of emergency."

"Such as repelling brigands who suddenly appear upon the scene?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why you did not use it this evening?"

"Because it is locked up in one of my bags—I don't know just which one—and Aunt Fanny has the key," confessed Beverly.

The chief of the "honest men" laughed again, a clear, ringing laugh that bespoke supreme confidence in his right to enjoy himself.

"And who is Aunt Fanny?" he asked, covering his patch carefully with his slouching hat.

"My servant. She's colored."

"Colored?" he asked in amazement.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, she's a negress. Don't you know what a colored person is?"

"You mean she is a slave—a black slave?"

"We don't own slaves any more."

He looked more puzzled than ever—then at last, to satisfy himself, walked over and peered into the coach.

Aunt Fanny sat up a dismal howl. An instant later Sir Honesty was pushed aside, and Miss Calhoun was anxiously trying to comfort her old friend through the window. The man looked on in silent wonder for a minute and then strode off to where a group of his men stood talking.

"Is yo' dald yit, Miss Bev'ly—is de end came?" moaned Aunt Fanny. Beverly could not repress a smile.

"I am quite alive, auntie. These men will not hurt us. They are very nice gentlemen."

She uttered the last observation in a loud voice, and it had its effect, for the leader came to her side with long strides.

"Convince your servant that we mean no harm, your highness," he said eagerly, a new deference in his voice and manner. "We have only the best of motives in mind. True, the hills are full of lawless fellows, and we are obliged to fight them almost daily, but you have fallen in with honest men—very nice gentlemen, I trust. Less than an hour ago we put a band of robbers to flight."

"I heard the shooting," cried Beverly. "It was that which put my escort to flight."

"They could not have been soldiers of Graustark, then, your highness," quite gallantly.

"They were Cossacks, or whatever you call them. But, pray, why do you call me 'your highness?'" demanded Beverly. The tall leader swept the ground with his hat once more.

"All the outside world knows the Princess Yette—why not the humble mountain man? You will pardon me, but every man in the hills knows that you are to pass through on the way from St. Petersburg to Ganlook. We are not so far from the world, after all, we rough people of the hills. We know that your highness left St. Petersburg by rail last Sunday and took to the highway day before yesterday because the floods had washed away the bridges north of Axphain. Even the hills have eyes and ears."

Beverly listened with increasing perplexity. It was true that she had left

St. Petersburg on Sunday; that the unprecedented floods had stopped all railway traffic in the hills, compelling her to travel for many miles by stage, and that the whole country was confusing her in some strange way with the Princess Yette. The news had evidently spread through Axphain and the hills with the swiftness of fire. It would be useless to deny the story; that she would not believe her. In a flash she decided that it would be best to pass for the time being as the ruler of Graustark. It remained only for her to impress upon Aunt Fanny the importance of this resolution.

"What wise old hills they must be," she said, with a sigh. "I am in a fix. You cannot expect me to admit, however, that I am the princess," she went on.

"It would be best if you did not let your highness be known."

"It is quite as easy to say that you are not the princess as to say that you are, so what matters, after all? We reserve the right, however, to do homage to the queen who rules over these wise old hills. I offer you the humble services of myself and my companions. We are yours to command."

"I am very grateful to find that you are not brigands, believe me," said Beverly. "Pray tell me who you are, then, and you shall be sufficiently rewarded for your good intentions."

"I? Oh, your highness, I am Baldos, the goat hunter, a poor subject for reward at your hands. I may as well admit that I am a poacher and have no legal right to the prosperity of your hills. The only reward I can ask is forgiveness for trespassing upon the property of others."

"You shall receive pardon for all transgressions, but you must get me to some place of safety," said Beverly eagerly.

"And quickly, too, you might well have added," he said, lightly. "The horses have rested, I think, so with your permission we may proceed. I know of a place where you may spend the night comfortably and be refreshed for the rough journey tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? How can I go on? I am alone!" she cried despairingly.

"Permit me to remind you that you are no longer alone. You have a ragged following, your highness, but it shall be a loyal one. Will you re-enter the coach? It is not far to the place I speak of, and I myself will drive you there. Come, it is getting late, and your retinue, at least, is hungry."

He flung open the coach door, and his hat swept the ground once more. The light of a lantern played fitfully upon his dark, gaunt face, with its gallant smile and ominous patch. She hesitated, fear entering her soul once more. He looked up quickly and saw the indecision in her eyes, the mute appeal.

"Trust me, your highness," he said gravely, and she allowed him to hand her into the coach.

A moment later he was upon the driver's box, reins in hand. Calling out to his companions in a language strange to Beverly, he cracked the whip, and once more they were lumbering over the wretched road. Beverly

ly sank back into the seat with a deep sigh of resignation.

"Well, I'm in for it," she thought. "It doesn't matter whether they are thieves or angels, I reckon I'll have to take what comes. He doesn't look very much like an angel, but he looked at me just now as if he thought I were one. Dear me, I wish I were back in Washin'ton!"

CHAPTER V.

TWO of the men walked close beside the door, one of them bearing a lantern. They conversed in low tones and in a language which Beverly could not understand. After awhile she found herself analyzing the garb and manner of the men. She was saying to herself that there were her first real specimens of Graustark peasantry, and they were to mark an ineffaceable spot in her memory. They were dark, strong faced men of medium height, with fierce black eyes and long black hair. As no two were dressed alike, it was impossible to recognize characteristic styles of attire. Some were in the rude, baggy costumes of the peasant as she had imagined him; others were dressed in the tight fitting but dilapidated uniforms of the soldiery, while several were in clothes partly European and partly oriental. There were hats and fezzes and caps, some with feathers in the bands, others without. The man nearest the coach wore the dirty gray uniform of an army officer, full of holes and rents, while another strode along in a pair of baggy yellow trousers and a dusty London dinner jacket. All in all, it was the motliest band of vagabonds she had ever seen. There were at least ten or a dozen in the party. While a few carried swords, all lugged the long rifles and crooked daggers of the Tartars.

"Aunt Fanny," Beverly whispered, suddenly moving to the side of the subdued servant, "where is my revolver?" It had come to her like a flash that a subsequent emergency should not find her unprepared. Aunt Fanny's jaw dropped, and her eyes were like white rings in a black screen.

"Good Lawd, wha—what fo', Miss Bev'ly!"

"Sh! Don't call me Miss Bev'ly. Now, just you pay 'tention to me, and I'll tell you something queer. Get my revolver right away and don't let those men see what you are doing." While Aunt Fanny's trembling fingers went in search of the firearm, Beverly outlined the situation briefly, but explicitly. The old woman was not slow to understand. Her wits sharpened by fear, she grasped Beverly's instructions with astonishing avidity.

"Ve'y well, yo' highness," she said, with due reverence. "Ah'll p'ocueh de bottle o' pepp'mint fo' yo' if yo' jes' don' make me pullin' an' baulin' 'mongst dese boxes. Mebbe yo' all 'druther hab de giugeh?" With this wonderful subterfuge as a shield she dug slyly into one of the bags and pulled forth a revolver. Under ordinary circumstances she would have been mortally afraid to touch it, but not so in this emergency. Beverly shoved the weapon into the pocket of

her gray traveling jacket.

"I feel much better now, Aunt Fanny," she said, and Aunt Fanny gave a vast chuckle.

"Yaas, ma'am, indeed—yo' highness," she agreed suavely.

The coach rolled along for half an hour and then stopped with a sudden jolt. An instant later the tall driver appeared at the window, his head uncovered. A man hard by held a lantern.

"Qua vandos ar deitanet, vos serent," said the leader, showing his white teeth in a triumphant smile. His exposed eye seemed to be glowing with pleasure and exultation.

"What?" murmured Beverly. "What?" he said, then his eye took on a look

"Ah, I see," he said, "your highness prefers not to speak the language of Graustark. Is it necessary for me to repeat in English?"

"I really wish you would," said Beverly, catching her breath. "Just to see how it sounds, you know."

"Your every wish shall be gratified. I beg to inform you that we have reached the Inn of the Hawk and Raven. This is where we dwell last night. Tomorrow we, too, abandon the place, so our fortunes may run together for some hours at least. There is but little to offer you in the way of nourishment, and there is none of the comforts of a palace. Yet princesses can no more be choosers than beggars when the fare's in one pot. Come, your highness, let me conduct you to the guest chamber of the Inn of the Hawk and Raven."

Beverly took his hand and stepped to the ground, looking about in wonder and perplexity.

"I see no inn," she murmured apprehensively.

"Look aloft, your highness. That great black canopy is the roof; we are standing upon the floor, and the dark shadows just beyond the circle of light are the walls of the Hawk and Raven."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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"Oh, you won't kill us?"

avail nothing in this instance," said the leader pleasantly. "Your escort has fled as though pursued by something stronger than shadows; your driver has deserted; your horses are half dead; you are indeed, as you have said, powerless. And you are, besides all these, in the clutches of a band of merciless cutthroats."

"Oh," moaned Beverly, suddenly leaning against the fore wheel, her eyes almost starting from her head. The leader laughed quietly—yes, good naturedly. "Oh, you won't—you won't kill us?" She had time to observe that there were smiles on the faces of all the men within the circle of light.

"Rest assured, your highness," said the leader, leaning upon his rifle barrel with careless grace, "we intend no harm to you. Every man you meet in Graustark is not a brigand, I trust, for your sake. We are simple hunters, and not what we may seem. It is fortunate that you have fallen into honest hands. There is some one in the coach?" he asked, quickly alert. A prolonged groan proved to Beverly that Aunt Fanny had screwed up sufficient courage to look out of the window.

"My old servant," she half whispered. Then, as several of the men started toward the door: "But she is old and wouldn't harm a fly. Please, please don't hurt her."

"Compose yourself; she is safe," said the leader. By this time it was quite dark. At a word from him two or three men lighted lanterns. The picture was more weird than ever in the fitful glow. "May I ask, your highness, how do you intend to reach Edelweiss in your present condition? You cannot manage those horses and, besides, you do not know the way."

"Aren't you going to rob us?" demanded Beverly, hope springing to the surface with a joyful bound. The



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